



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM HERDE

Award-winning teacher Virginia Freyermuth at Duxbury Junior/Senior High School with some of her students' work.

A teacher of art, and the art of living

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY — Virginia Freyermuth has a sign hanging in her studio art classroom at Duxbury Junior/Senior High School:

"There are three rules in this classroom: Respect. Respect. Respect."

"Art is a big, threatening adventure," Freyermuth explains. "And you have to feel safe when you're doing it."

Freyermuth has garnered a great deal of respect herself, and not only from her students. In 1994, she was named Massachusetts Teacher of the Year; last year, she was named National Outstanding Visual Art Educator, receiving an American Teacher Award in a program cosponsored by the

Cont.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM HERDE

Freyermuth talks with students at a reception in her honor.

TEACHER

Continued from Page 57

Walt Disney Co. and McDonald's. The Disney Channel will air a 10-minute profile of Freyermuth, and profiles of 11 other outstanding educators, in March.

"It was a total shock," Freyermuth says of the award, which she accepted at a ceremony in Washington, D.C. last month. "There are teachers all over the United States that would never have that opportunity to accept that award, and I was representing them. I felt that responsibility."

The teacher's policy of respect goes three ways: respect for self, respect for others and respect between student and teacher. She practices the last diligently, giving the young artists in her charge the freedom to work on their own projects at their own pace.

"Over the years I've become more trusting of my students," Freyermuth notes. "If I entrust them with an idea, they'll often come back with more than I asked for. That's exciting for me as a teacher and as an artist. We're giving each other things. The atmosphere charges the room."

Just the numbers are enough to recommend Freyermuth for an award. When she came to Duxbury as art coordinator 10 years ago, 35 of the 1,200 students at the school were enrolled in art classes. This year, nearly 650 students take art in one form or another. If it's not drawing and painting, it's photography or computer graphics. She works with the advanced drawing and painting students and supervises two teachers in the other fields.

Freyermuth, who has taught since she got out of college, is a painter on her own time. In her classroom, she is certainly not the picture of a typical art teacher. There's no paint-smudged smock, no charcoal under her manicured nails. A small, fine-boned, elegantly tailored woman in her 40s, she perches on a stool by a worktable in the classroom where she teaches advanced drawing and painting. Self-portraits of the students hang along one wall - thoughtful, expertly executed drawings in color and black-and-white.

"They are their own worst critics," Freyermuth observes of her students. "They ask, 'What do you think about my picture, Mrs. Freyermuth?' I say, 'What do you think?' They're much more critical than I am. Most of my time is spent reinforcing the good things. If you look at the work you're doing, and you want to improve it, you're developing thinking skills, organizational skills and problem-solving skills."

Students' art hangs all over the walls of Duxbury Junior/Senior High School, testifying not only to Freyermuth's teaching abilities but to her political savvy and administrative acumen. She graduated from the school herself, and though she now lives in Plymouth with her husband and two children, she knows the community.

"Not many years ago, we had a difficult fiscal time in the schools, and the community had to make a decision to maintain a comprehensive high school" that would include electives like art, she says. "If a program like this was lost," Freyermuth asks, pointing at the self-portraits beside her, "where would these students be? How would they express themselves?"

"That summer," she continues, "residents raised \$120,000 out of pocket to maintain these programs. In the fall, we came back and still we didn't know if we'd be back the next year. We wanted to show the community what it meant to us."

She smiles. "That year, 10 percent of the senior class went on to continue with art in college. More students won scholastic art awards that year than ever."

And the visual-art program - along with other electives - continued.

In the classroom, Freyermuth has a presence that's gentle but unremittably confident - in her students, in herself and in the value of their joint enterprise. On this day, students are working on different projects, from caricatures to still lifes.

At one table, Kate MacLeod, 17, bends over her self-portrait, laboriously coloring in raindrops on the image of a window that fills the background. A junior, MacLeod transferred to Duxbury from a private school in part because of Freyermuth's reputation.

With her blue-painted fingernails and a heavy chain choker around her neck, MacLeod looks the part of a young artist. "It's not like other art classes where you come in and the teacher gives you an assignment," MacLeod points out. "Mrs. Freyermuth knows what she's talking about. . . . She really works for her students."

Alicia Escott, 16, a sophomore, stands across the room dabbing at a landscape drawing with a pastel. "I couldn't *not* take art!" she says. "And I'm in here with seniors. You look around this room and there's this mass of talent. It gives you the general idea of what you could be doing."

Escott prefers art classes to her academic curriculum. "The arts are much more self-centered," she reflects. "In science class, I'm there to learn. And because I'm there for that, I don't learn as much. Here, I'm just in the moment. I think you learn a lot more when you're not trying to."

Ultimately, if Freyermuth has anything to teach through art, it's about how to be more fully human - learning about and accepting who you are. That's a crucial lesson for adolescents.

She looks around the room, at students eagerly examining and filling in their drawings.

"Now, they're halfway through their work. It's a critical point. The paper starts to get filled in. It may not look like what they wanted it to. They may be discouraged," Freyermuth says in a hushed voice. "They may want to quit, to start again. It's my job to boost people up, to get them to keep on with their ideas and not quit."

The teacher pauses to watch a student color in a shadow with brown pencil.

"I once had a kid who wanted to quit. He said, 'I'll start another one, and I won't have these types of problems.' I said, 'You'll have other problems, then. If you stop now, you're not learning about art. You're learning about quitting.'"

"He looked at me and he said, 'Mrs. Freyermuth, you're not teaching us about art. You're teaching us about life and calling it teaching art.'"

She smiles.

"He said, 'That's pretty sneaky.'"

JAN 23, 1996